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RUFUS KING: SOLDIER, EDITOR, AND STATESMAN

GENERAL CHARLES KING

My first direct American ancestor in the paternal line was Richard King, who came from Kent, England, to America in 1710. The King genealogy for the first half-century or so thereafter is somewhat obscure; but Richard King of Scarboro, Maine, a son of the original immigrant, stands out as a prosperous shipbuilder and lumber dealer, who had served as captain and commissary at the siege of Louisburg in King George's War. His son, Rufus King, the first, served as senator from the state of New York for upwards of twenty years. He also served as minister to England in the administration of George Washington, and again for a short time twenty years later. The second son of Rufus, Charles King, was long the editor of the New York *American* and later for many years the president of Columbia College.

My father, Rufus King, eldest son of Charles King, was born at Number 3 Pearl Street, New York City, January 26, 1814. He grew up in New York City and received his earlier education there. When only fifteen years of age he entered West Point and was graduated at the age of nineteen, being probably the youngest graduate who has ever gone out of that institution. He was commissioned brevet Second Lieutenant of Engineers and assigned to duty as assistant to Captain Robert E. Lee, United States Engineers, in the construction of Fortress Monroe. Later he was ordered to duty on the improvement of the navigation of the upper Hudson, with headquarters at Albany. From his association with Captain Lee he conceived an affection and respect for that officer which the stress of Civil War did not destroy. In the winter of 1861-62, when my father was in command of a brigade in the Union army, he was stationed at Arlington, the estate of General Lee, opposite

Washington. My mother, who joined him there, took it upon herself to sort out the more valuable items of clothing and other personal property belonging to the Lees and have them boxed and labeled with a view to restoring them to their owner at the close of the War. Whether this was ever done, or not, I never knew. In 1863, about the time of Lee's invasion of Maryland, Father's command captured his son, W. H. F. Lee, near Yorktown. General King succeeded in sending word to Richmond that the son was in safe hands; I was afterward told that shortly after General Lee got back from Pennsylvania messages were exchanged between him and my father on the subject. Father had a high opinion of General Lee, regarding him as the peer of any man in either army, whether from the viewpoint of a soldier or a gentleman, but deplored his taking up arms against the union of states.

In 1836, being still but a brevet second lieutenant and believing that the army in peace time offered a very poor opportunity for a "career," Father resigned his commission and accepted an appointment as assistant engineer in the survey of the New York and Erie Railway. He ran the survey of a great part of the Susquehanna Division of the line, and later as far west as Olean, New York. By this time the road was in financial straits; building was discontinued, and in 1838 Rufus King went back to Albany, there to begin life anew.

There he entered the office of the Albany *Evening Journal*, of which Thurlow Weed was editor and proprietor, in the capacity of associate editor. Besides attending to his newspaper work he took up the study of law. In 1839 William H. Seward, a personal and political friend of Weed, became governor of New York. He appointed my father adjutant general of the state, which position he held during the four years of Seward's administration as governor, learning journalism, meantime, under the able tutelage of Weed.

Some years before this, in 1836, Father had married Ellen Eliot, who was a direct descendant of John Eliot, the noted Apostle to the Indians. She died within a year, and in 1843 he married Susan Eliot, a younger sister of his first wife. While engaged in engineer work in the army he had been sent west to make a temporary survey of the boundary line between the states of Michigan and Ohio and Indiana. This was his first glimpse of the West and he was much impressed with the commercial and other possibilities of the country adjoining Lake Michigan. An acquaintance in the engineer service interested him in Milwaukee and in 1845 he was induced to remove thither to become editor and part owner of the Milwaukee *Sentinel and Gazette*. It was in September, 1845 that he arrived at Milwaukee from Buffalo on the old steamer *Empire State*. For a time he made his home with his wife and infant boy at the old United States Hotel, which stood on the corner of Huron and East Water Streets. He then removed to a little house on Jefferson Street, nearly opposite the site of the present Layton Art Gallery, where his second child, Fanny, was born, October 11, 1846.

In 1847, I think, Father moved into a little frame house at the northeast corner of Mason and Van Buren Streets, owned by Alanson Sweet, who occupied the next house to the east, and there, at "King's Corner," as it came to be known, he lived until the spring of 1861, when he left Milwaukee, as he supposed, to take passage for Italy as United States minister resident at the court of the Papal States. During all these years he had remained editor-in-chief, and during most of them proprietor, of the Milwaukee *Sentinel*.

In 1848 he served in the second constitutional convention and there bore an important part in framing the constitution of the state. Although he was a Whig, and Wisconsin was then over-whelmingly Democratic, it is a matter of family tradition that he could have gone to Washington as one of

the new state's first senators had he so desired. But he felt that the building up of the *Sentinel* required his personal attention, and he declined the opportunity thus opened to him.

Although a graduate of West Point, my father took no part in the Mexican War. Like General Grant, who had to take part in it because he was still in the army, Rufus King thoroughly disapproved of that war, although as a soldier he took great pride in the record made by the little army of regulars under General Scott and General Taylor.

Father took great interest in the public schools of Milwaukee. He was the city's first superintendent of schools, and served for many years without salary or emolument, examining the teachers, prescribing the course of study, and doing most of the printing required for the schools at his office and at his own expense. In the financial panic of 1857 the *Sentinel* was wrecked, and Rufus King was forced to dispose of the property to Jermain and Brightman, who, realizing its value, came from New York to buy it. King accepted the editorship under the new management, along with an interest in the business. Being impoverished, however, his friends provided in the winter of 1858-59 a salary of \$2,000 for the office of superintendent of schools. This was the first time my father ever received a cent for his services to the school system, but this income did not last long. For years even the Democratic papers had been in the habit of making reference to King as "the highly efficient superintendent of schools"; but no sooner was a salary attached to the office than his Democratic friends concluded that he had labored too long in this capacity, and at the next election a very worthy and efficient Democrat was chosen to succeed him.

Rufus King was a member of the first Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin, serving in this capacity until 1854. He interested himself enthusiastically in all that pertained to the development of the city of Milwaukee. He

joined the fire department and was for long years the foreman of Engine Company Number 1. He was major general of state militia and captain of the first American company of militia in the city. He practically organized the Milwaukee Boat Club in 1856, with a membership composed of the leading professional and business men of the city. Alexander Mitchell, Jerome Brigham, the Ogden brothers, David and Tom, Charles F. Ilsley, Norman J. Emmons, Dr. John K. Bartlett, and a score of other men prominent in Milwaukee society were for several years active in the Boat Club. King took great interest in the organization of the Musical Society, and the great influx of Germans, many of whom were charming and cultivated people, made this society one of Milwaukee's greatest successes in the early days of the city.

Very many men who later became prominent in Milwaukee and Wisconsin politics came to Milwaukee with letters of introduction to Rufus King. I distinctly remember Carl Schurz as one of these. In politics King was a pronounced Whig, having been educated under William H. Seward and Thurlow Weed of New York, and the *Sentinel* was for long years an exponent of Whig policies and doctrines; but it was the first paper of any prominence in the state to support the Republican platform and to become an earnest advocate of the candidacy of Frémont and Dayton for presidency and vice presidency in 1856. As the campaign of 1860 approached, it was but natural that King and the *Sentinel* should be earnest supporters of William H. Seward for the presidency; but the verdict of the party at the Chicago convention was all sufficient, and King, although personally disappointed by reason of his friendship and affection for Seward, employed all his influence in Wisconsin, both personally and editorially, to procure the election of Abraham Lincoln.

Having lost the superintendency of schools with its newly-established salary, in the spring of 1861 Rufus King

went to Washington, armed with letters from prominent Milwaukee men, to apply for the office of postmaster at Milwaukee. On laying his case before Secretary Blair he was told the office had been given to another, and that King himself had signed the petition for his appointment! This had been done the year before, and Father had forgotten about it. Shortly thereafter, while breakfasting at Willard's Hotel, still somewhat depressed over his failure to gain the appointment, a friend came over from an adjoining table and holding out his hand said, "General King, I congratulate you with all my heart." This was Father's first intimation that President Lincoln had appointed him to the most delightful post in the diplomatic service of the United States, that of Minister Resident to the Papal States. The appointment was due to the influence of his old friend Seward. Father had dined with him and been warmly welcomed, but he neither sought nor expected any appointment from the Secretary of State. There existed a deep affection between the two men, and Seward withheld all news of the appointment in order that, when made, it might come as a surprise to his friend.

Rufus King returned to Milwaukee, resigned his editorship of the *Sentinel*, attended a farewell banquet tendered him by his friends at the Newhall House, boxed up his household goods, and set forth upon his new mission. He had proceeded as far as New York and his baggage was aboard the steamer when the news came of the firing on Fort Sumter. A trained soldier, King realized that his country had more urgent need of his services at home than in the Papal States. He took the first train for Washington and begged President Lincoln that he might be commissioned in the volunteer army that must be raised for the defense of the Union, suggesting that Governor Randall of Wisconsin be sent to Rome in his stead. It was done. Rufus King's name was in the first list of general officers of volunteers appointed

by President Lincoln in May, 1861, and he returned to Milwaukee to assist in the organization of the first Wisconsin regiments. Here the governor and legislature appointed him brigadier general of Wisconsin volunteers, in the hope that President Lincoln would be induced thereby to form the first few regiments of Wisconsin men into one brigade with King as its commander.

In August, 1861, King was at Kalorama Heights, on the northern outskirts of Washington, organizing his brigade. He had with him at this time the Second, Fifth, and Sixth Wisconsin Infantry, the Nineteenth Indiana, and, temporarily, four or five regiments from other states, which were subsequently transferred. This was the beginning of the organization which subsequently became famous as the Iron Brigade. During the period of its organization, on many a pleasant evening President Lincoln appeared at General King's camp, accompanied by Secretary Seward and the relations between the brigade commander and the President and his Secretary of State were most cordial.

The relations were suddenly interrupted, however, in September. At midnight an order came to General King to move his brigade to and across Chain Bridge and support the brigade of a junior officer, William F. Smith of Vermont. General McClellan, who had been graduated at West Point several years after General King, had been called to Washington and placed in supreme command. He was surrounded by a group of young and eager officers of the regular service, and it is possible that, as he only once visited General King's big command and scarcely knew him, he thought King too intimate with the Commander-in-Chief. At all events we crossed Chain Bridge in the darkness of night (I was attached to the brigade in the capacity of mounted orderly) and General King, although empowered by the army regulations to assume command of the troops in the field over a junior officer, nevertheless in all courtesy

reported to General Smith, and I well remember the words: "General Smith, I have brought my entire brigade with me, and am here to support you in any way that you may designate." Boy that I was, I could not but notice General Smith's embarrassment. Yet what he requested of my father was that he should leave on the south side of the Potomac three-fourths of his brigade and himself with one regiment retire to the north side, leaving General Smith to carry out the orders of General McClellan. In all subordination General King accepted the arrangement, believing that it would presently be corrected, and before long it was. King's brigade was ordered to take station at Arlington, the estate of his old friend and superior, General Lee. There the brigade had the best possible station, and General King every opportunity under his new division commander, Irvin McDowell, to train and instruct his brigade. Thus it came about that before March, 1862 the brigade was in a high state of soldierly efficiency and General King was almost disappointed when promoted to the command of the division, being reluctant to give over the immediate command of the brigade he had organized and developed.

In April, 1862 the division made its swift march on Fredricksburg. A short time thereafter Frémont, becoming dissatisfied with his command of the mountain department of Virginia, and smarting under the criticism of the Secretary of War, asked to be relieved, and a presidential order was issued assigning Rufus King to the command of this important department and the large force there engaged. That night the officers of the division came to King and begged that he would not leave them just at the outset of a critical campaign (for McClellan had been beaten back from the Peninsula). King therefore begged leave to decline the promotion in order that he might remain in command of his division in the fighting that was impending in the immediate vicinity of Washington. He ventured to suggest that it

might strengthen the Union cause and at the same time give joy to thousands of German soldiers if Frémont's command were given to Franz Sigel, and this was done.

On the twenty-eighth of August, 1862, after many wearisome marches to and fro under confusing orders from higher authority, King's division moving on Centerville along the Warrenton Turnpike just about sunset was fiercely attacked by Stonewall Jackson on its left flank. It was a complete surprise to King, whose orders gave him to suppose that Jackson was at or beyond Centerville, much farther to the east. Five brigades of Jackson's infantry and four batteries of field artillery concentrated their fire on King's old brigade in an hour's fierce fighting before dark. From this time it became known as the Iron Brigade, for although one-third of its number were shot down in their tracks the brigade never yielded an inch. At one o'clock in the morning following this severe action, having received information that Stonewall Jackson with his entire command was in the immediate vicinity, King, after holding a council with the brigade commanders, ordered the division to retire to the southeast toward Manassas Junction, where he was sure of finding support. The next day, August 29, late in the afternoon, General Lee, with the remainder of the Confederate army, effected a junction with Jackson near the field from which King had retired. Months afterwards General Pope claimed that he had sent positive orders to General King the evening of the twenty-eighth to hold his ground and he would support him, in spite of which King abandoned his position, thus inferentially making King responsible for the junction of Lee and Jackson on the twenty-ninth and the disastrous second battle of Manassas, which followed. Had King remained he would have been engulfed in the morning; but he never received such orders, nor was there ever found any officer who could remember having received any such order from General Pope to General King. Such an order was

sent by Pope to General McDowell, who was lost in the woods somewhere in the vicinity of the stream of Bull Run, far in the rear of the battlefield of King's division. I have in my possession General Pope's original letter to General King in which he says: "I am perfectly satisfied you did the very best you could under the circumstances," adding further that the officer by whom he supposed he sent that order was not known to him by name, nor did he know the officer was on King's staff.¹ It was easily proved that King received no such order. But Pope's official report was not made public until the spring of 1863, and then the impression became disseminated that General King, by disobedience of orders, was responsible for the junction of Lee and Jackson. For long years he had to bear the stigma, and it ruined his health and broke his heart. He should have called for a court of inquiry and had the matter threshed out; but he showed Pope's full and complete reply to his letter, completely exonerating him, to Seward and to Lincoln and to Stanton, and they all expressed themselves as satisfied with it and advised King that he should feel so too. There were political reasons in favor of not dragging the matter to light, since it must inevitably discredit Pope, and General King was one of those men who, conscious of his own rectitude, submitted to adversity in silence.

In the fall of 1863 Governor Randall desired to return home, and Secretary Seward induced my father, whose health was now impaired, to resign his commission in order to take up the duties at the Papal Court which he had thrust aside in 1861. Here for four years he had a delightful association with Pope Pius the Ninth and his secretary of state, Cardinal Antonelli. While here it became his duty to receive and entertain General McClellan, and to present him to the Pope. While here, also, he was instrumental in the capture

¹This entire episode with Pope's letter in full is discussed in my pamphlet, *Gainesville* (Milwaukee, 1903).

of John H. Surratt, who was implicated in the conspiracy which resulted in the assassination of President Lincoln and the attempted assassination of Secretary Seward. Surratt was sent back to the United States long after his fellow conspirators had been hanged, and in his case the jury disagreed.

In 1867, the temporal power of the Papacy having been abolished, the mission to Rome was abolished by Congress, and Rufus King returned to America, paying a brief visit to Milwaukee in the fall of that year. Later he was made deputy collector of the port of New York and took up his residence in that city. Increasing ill health, however, compelled him to lead the life of an invalid from 1870 until his death, October 13, 1876. He is buried with his father and grandfather in the old churchyard of Grace Church, Jamaica, Long Island.



GENERAL RUFUS KING

From a photograph taken in May, 1861. General Charles King characterizes this as "the best picture we ever had of Father."